

12/29/21 Wednesday

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Ghislaine Maxwell Found Guilty on 5 Out of 6 Counts in Sex Trafficking Trial
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The jury in the US federal case against Ghislaine Maxwell reached a verdict on Wednesday, finding the British media heiress guilty of five of six sex trafficking charges in connection with the late financier Jeffrey Epstein.

She was found guilty of sex trafficking of a minor, transporting a minor with the intent to engage in criminal sexual activity, and three counts of conspiracy. The jury found her not guilty of enticing a minor to travel to engage in criminal sexual activity.

"A unanimous jury has found Ghislaine Maxwell guilty of one of the worst crimes imaginable – facilitating and participating in the sexual abuse of children. Crimes that she committed with her long-time partner and co-conspirator, Jeffrey Epstein. The road to justice has been far too long. But, today, justice has been done", US Attorney Damian Williams, who prosecuted Maxwell's case, [said in a statement](#) following the verdict.

Maxwell, who turned 60 over the weekend, could face up to 70 years behind bars. She also has a separate pending trial on two perjury counts.

The jury has struggled for days to reach a verdict, with Maxwell's trial judge asking the jury to [continue their deliberations](#) through New Year's Day, which is Saturday, in an attempt to avoid a mistrial due to the Omicron variant-driven outbreak of COVID-19 in New York.

Maxwell has been in custody since her July 2020 arrest on charges of procuring young girls for Epstein, her boyfriend, who [apparently committed suicide](#) in a New York jail the previous August while awaiting trial for illegal sex acts in connection with the same trafficking ring. She pleaded not guilty to the charges, which the prosecution said occurred between 1994 and 2004.

Many of the young girls were reportedly transported to Epstein's private island in the Caribbean, Little Saint James in the US Virgin Islands, with many politicians and public figures having been [exposed in the trial](#) as travelling there for Epstein's sex parties, including former US Presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, and [Prince Andrew](#), Duke of York.

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US Africa Chief Calls Somali PM Roble as Opposition Demands Farmaajo Resign for 'Coup'
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Opposition is mounting to Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmaajo, after he attempted to have Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble suspended. The

US and its allies are backing Roble in the power struggle, and opposition parties are demanding an investigation of Farmaajo's actions.

Roble's office tweeted on Wednesday he had held "a telephone conversation with US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Molly Phee, where the subject of discussions revolved around the political, security, and electoral situation in the country". [Phee's office similarly](#) tweeted that she had urged Roble to hold a meeting of the country's National Consultative Council (NCC) to correct election irregularities and swiftly concluded credible elections.

Phee's office also said the diplomat had [spoken with Farmaajo](#) "about the urgent need to stop escalatory rhetoric and actions" for security forces to "remain neutral", and to support Roble's convening of the NCC.

A day prior, [her office adopted](#) a far more bellicose tone, saying "the US is prepared to act against those who obstruct Somalia's path to peace" and indicating its support for Roble.

The [lengthy election process](#) in Somalia is nearly complete, with the votes being tallied this week for representatives to the House of the People, the lower house of Somalia's national legislature. Once the country's parliament is fully staffed, the lawmakers can begin the [indirect elections](#) for president to potentially replace Farmaajo, who is just one of many candidates seeking the high office.

Election Dispute, or Corruption Probe?

Roble was assigned control over the election process in May after an attempt by Farmaajo to [extend his mandate](#) by two years to settle disputes over elections nearly spun the country into a new civil war. However, he has also been the subject of a corruption investigation related to [accusations that he stole](#) a parcel of coastal land from the country's Coast Guard for his own purposes.

Over the weekend, Roble made several moves seen as [attempting to roadblock](#) that probe, including shuffling the Justice and Defence ministry portfolios around and ordering the suspension of the Somali Coast Guard commander, Gen. Abdihamid Mohamed Dirir, the officer who brought the accusations against him. In response, Farmaajo attempted to suspend Roble's powers on Monday, claiming he was "linked with corruption".

In turn, [Roble accused Farmaajo](#) of seemingly deciding to "destroy government institutions" and ordered "all Somali national forces to work under the command of the office of the prime minister from today".

Soldiers from the Presidential Guard seized Roble's office on Monday, but were later driven from the building by troops loyal to Roble, who have fortified the surrounding area, according to the [Somali Guardian](#). Somalia's army chief, Odowa Yusuf Rage, then dismissed Presidential Guards commander Hassan Adan Dhi'is and [ordered his arrest](#).

Then on Tuesday, the Council of Presidential Candidates, a conglomerate of opposition parties, denounced Farmaajo's moves as an "attempted coup" and called on the president to quit his office and to be investigated.

"The council demands that Farmaajo vacate Villa Somalia immediately to bring an end to disruptions and plots he continues to orchestrate inside the state house", the opposition politicians said in a Tuesday statement, according to the [Somali Guardian](#).

"The council asks for [a] quick investigation to be launched and charges be filed against Farmaajo and others who aided him in that coup".

US Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), a Somali-American lawmaker whose family sought refuge in the US from the Somali Civil War in the early 1990s, also tweeted on Tuesday that it was "time for him to step aside".

Protesters also gathered in the capital of Mogadishu on Wednesday to voice their support for the prime minister, but were [dispersed by police](#), prompting denunciations from opposition politicians.

US Rallies Support for Roble

The US is now gathering support for Roble around the globe, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaking with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta on Tuesday night.

"President Kenyatta and I spoke today about the urgency of a cessation of hostilities to resolve the escalating conflict in Ethiopia and the need for Somali leaders to conclude elections as soon as possible and to act with restraint", [Blinken tweeted](#).

Kenya borders both nations and has had its [share of disputes](#) with both, as well. Under Kenyatta, Nairobi has edged closer to the US and France, with [Kenyan air bases](#) serving as launching pads for US missions against al-Shabaab in Somalia. Additionally, French President Emmanuel [Macron visited Nairobi](#) over the summer to finalise infrastructure project deals. Sweden's minister for International Development Cooperation, [Matilda Ernkrans](#), voiced her support for Roble on Twitter on Tuesday, casting Roble's attempted ouster as an attack on the democratic process.

Farmaajo's government has long been a partner of the US in East Africa, where US Africa Command has waged a 14-year-long [war against al-Shabaab](#), an al-Qaeda* affiliate, although US military involvement in Somalia dates to the early 1990s.

He, too, sought refuge from the civil war in the US, becoming a US citizen and registered Republican Party member before returning to Somalia in 2010 for a short-lived term as prime minister. He became president in 2017 in the country's first democratic elections in 50 years, and the relative stability under his tenure has seen the return of US and UK oil [prospecting](#), particularly in offshore blocks believed to hold rich petroleum reserves. However, Farmaajo has also aroused Western indignation by [cooperating with Ethiopia](#) and Eritrea, the latter being a country the US has treated as a pariah, and by penning [deals with China](#).

Roble, by comparison, is a political neophyte, being appointed to the prime ministry by Farmaajo in September 2020 to head the transition process for elections originally anticipated to happen that December. He was previously a civil engineer.

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MTG Calls African American Festival Kwanzaa a 'Fake Religion Created by a Psychopath'
By - Morgan Artyukhina

In her latest foray into American cultural commentary, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) took aim at Kwanzaa, a community festival celebrated by African Americans, attacking both the festival and a conservative political group that posted about it.

On December 26, the first day of the six-day festival, the College Republicans official Twitter account posted a simple message, writing "Wishing you a happy and prosperous Kwanzaa!" accompanied by a graphic of the seven-candled kinara candelabra used to mark each day of Kwanzaa.

However, many conservative posters took issue with the tweet, replying with messages questioning the purpose and wisdom of marking the holiday. None garnered greater attention than Greene, though, who called it "a fake religion created by a psychopath."

"You aren't bringing in new voters, you are turning them away," she said, adding, "People are tired of pandering and BS."

As is often the case, Greene got many of the basic facts wrong. Kwanzaa is a secular festival created by African American activist Maulana Karenga in 1966 as a way to [celebrate seven values](#) he felt were important to the Black community's future. The festival's name derives from a Swahili term for the first fruit of the season, an event that prompted celebrations in many traditional African cultures from which the ancestors of many African Americans were kidnapped and brought to the US by slave traders.

Karenga was a civil rights [activist who formed](#) the Black nationalist group US (as in, not "them") in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts riots and assassination of Organization of Afro-American Unity founder Malcolm X with the aim of promoting Black cultural unity as a distinct national identity. This vision lent itself to holidays like Kwanzaa that promoted values like faith, cooperative economics, responsibility, and unity, but also brought them into conflict with the Black Panthers and their revolutionary socialist ideology that often exploded into violence between the two groups.

However, the College Republicans didn't return fire after Greene's criticisms, instead choosing simply to retweet other Republican accounts that also commemorated Kwanzaa, including several by former US President Donald Trump and his administration, with whom Greene has [often aligned herself](#).

Greene only leapt to the national political stage in January, but she hasn't failed to garner attention over the last 11 months with a [near-constant barrage](#) of what some might call "hot takes," including [numerous comparisons](#) between pandemic response measures and the Holocaust. Recently, she [jumped into a spat](#) between freshman lawmaker Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) and one of two Muslim women in Congress, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) after [Boebert insinuated Omar](#) was a terrorist.

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Almost One-Third of US Adults Claim No Religious Affiliation, A 25% Increase Since 2016
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A recent poll found the number of nonreligious Americans is rapidly increasing in recent years. The pandemic-era trend is a reversal of the prevailing logic surrounding calamities and faith. According to a survey conducted between May 29 and August 5, the results of which were [published earlier this month](#) by Pew Research Center, 29% of US adults claim no religious

affiliation. That's an increase of 6 percentage points since 2016 and an effective doubling since 2007, when just 16% of Americans said they were nonreligious.

Another prominent trend identified by the data is that fewer than half of Americans - just 45% - say they pray every day, and 32% say they seldom pray, if ever.

Another poll, conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, [found in-person attendance](#) at houses of worship had declined by 12% over the past 18 months. While many went online during COVID-19-related lockdowns, when they restarted services, fewer people were showing up than before.

People are leaving religion for a variety of reasons, including a disconnect between modern political sensibilities and dogmatic views on women, race, or LGBTQ rights, or simply a desire to escape the confines of tradition and social hierarchy.

"The pandemic showed us that people don't like isolation," New Age spiritualist Deepak [Chopra told CNBC](#). "[In] the absence of that human need for love, compassion, joy, sharing, attention, affection, appreciation, gratitude, ... people panicked."

Chopra said that while numbers of religious people are falling, Americans still have a deep hunger for spiritual experiences and communities.

"The spiritual experience will never go away," he said. "The need to find meaning and purpose in our existence will never go away. The need to resolve what is inevitable suffering will never go away."

However, at the same time, four in ten US adults consider religion to be "very important" in their lives, and houses of worship from all faiths are still welcoming new members.

[Another poll](#) conducted by Pew at the start of the year, which was roughly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, found that the global health crisis had strengthened many people's faith. However, 68% of US adults still said their own faith hadn't changed that much during the pandemic.

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UN Security Council Calls for End of Violence in Myanmar After 35 People Killed

UNITED NATIONS, December 29 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is calling for an immediate end of violence in Myanmar after 35 people, including two children, were killed by the country's military last week.

"The members of the Security Council condemned the reported killing of at least 35 people, including four children and two staff of Save the Children, in Kayah State on 24 December," UN Security Council President Abdou Abarry said in a statement on Wednesday. "They stressed the need to ensure accountability for this act."

Two staff members of the UK-based international non-governmental organization Save the Children were also killed in the attack.

The UN Security Council continues to support the people of Myanmar and a democratic transition in the country, Abarry said.

Human rights must be respected and there must be unimpeded humanitarian access into the country, Abarry added.

According to Save the Children, the Myanmar military attacked several vehicles in Kayah on Friday. At least 35 bodies, eight burned-out cars and five motorcycles were found at the scene, local media reported.

The military came to power in Myanmar on February 1 on the pretext that the National League for Democracy party, which was then in power, had rigged the November 2020 general elections. The military coup triggered a wave of civil protests that rocked the country from February-May 2021, resulting in more than 1,300 people killed in clashes with law enforcement officers.

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Biden Admin Asks US Supreme Court to Hear Case Over 'Remain in Mexico' Policy - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has asked the US Supreme Court to hear a case over the Trump-era Migrant Protection Protocols policy, otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy, in a petition for a writ of certiorari filed with the high court. "This Court should grant the petition for a writ of certiorari and set the case for argument this Term. The court of appeals' decision has enormous legal and practical consequences, and there are compelling reasons for the Court to review it promptly," the petition, filed on Wednesday, said.

In August, a US federal court in the state of Texas ordered the Biden administration to restart the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) - otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy. The decision came after the US Supreme Court rejected the Biden administration's attempt to end the program.

The policy was officially reinstated on December 6, since which date US authorities have returned upwards of 160 migrants to Mexico, according to UN International Organization for Migration spokesperson Alberto Cabezas Talavero.

If the Supreme Court grants the petition and hears the case, they should order expedited briefing so that the case can be heard in the court's April sitting, the petition said.

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UN Chief Condemns Looting of Equipment Given to Sudanese Authorities - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns the recent attacks against United Nations facilities in Sudan and the looting of equipment given to the Sudanese authorities to benefit the public, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the continued looting and attacks against United Nations facilities, equipment and supplies gifted to the Sudanese authorities for civilian use in El Fasher, Darfur," Dujarric said in a statement on Wednesday.

Dujarric said that a World Food Program facility was attacked on Tuesday and more than 1,000 metric tons of food supplies meant to feed 730,000 people for a month was stolen.

Guterres calls on the Sudanese authorities to restore order and assure assets from the former United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission are for civilian use only in Darfur, Dujarric said.

A former United Nations logistics base in Al Fashir, which is currently controlled by local Sudanese authorities, has been under threat of attack and looting since December 24.

Armed clashes between supporters of the Sudanese government and rebel separatist groups in the Darfur region have been going on since 2003. According to various estimates, up to 500,000 people have died in the conflict, and over 2.5 million people have been displaced.

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Fauci Says COVID-19 Vaccine Approval for Children Under 5 in US May Take Months

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US infectious disease expert and presidential medical adviser Anthony Fauci said a coronavirus vaccine for children younger than five years old may take months to be approved.

"Likely for children that young [it] will be a three dose vaccine which means it likely won't be for a couple of months at least before it's approved," Fauci said during an interview with CNN on Wednesday.

Fauci said vaccine tests on two- to four-year-old children has not met the criteria for approval by the authorities.

Children between the ages 5 and 12 are approved only for so-called "primary" coronavirus vaccine shots, made up of two Pfizer doses, and many have only begun their inoculation in recent weeks.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said in earlier remarks that US health authorities hope to make a decision in the coming days or weeks on coronavirus "booster" vaccines for children 12 to 15 years of age.

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US Navy Orders \$55.9M in Navigation Equipment for Sea Lift Oil Supply Ships - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation, NAV Systems and NAVTECH Marine Electronics have won a \$55,940,500 US Navy contract for

electronic communication and navigation equipment, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [at] Sperry Marine, Saint Rose, Louisiana, Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [at] Charlottesville, Virginia, NAV Systems [at] Chesapeake, Virginia and NAVTECH Marine Electronics, Honolulu, Hawaii were awarded a multiple ... contract with a shared ceiling of \$55,940,500," the release said on Wednesday.

The deal fulfills Military Sealift Command's (MSC) requirement to procure services and parts to maintain bridge electronic communication equipment, navigation equipment, steering gear and other navigational systems aboard MSC's ocean-going fleet, the release said.

The MSC fleet consists of "15 replenishment oilers (T-AO); three fleet ocean tugs (T-ATF); two hospital ships (T-AH); two rescue and salvage ships (T-ARS); two submarine tenders (AS); 14 dry cargo, ammunition ships (T-AKE); two fast combat support ships (T-AOE); and 12 expeditionary fast transport ships (T-EPF)," the release added.

The contract also provides services for MSC's roll-on, roll-off ships Seay, Pililaau, Sisler and Dahl, according to the release.

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PREVIEW - Biden, Putin to Hold Call on Thursday Ahead of January Talks on Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday are expected to discuss a broad range of security and strategic issues ahead of the scheduled series of talks on Ukraine.

"President Biden will speak with President Putin by telephone at the request of the Russian side," a senior US administration official told reporters on Wednesday. "The two presidents will discuss the upcoming dialogues with Russia on a range of security and strategic issues. Those include bilateral talks through the Strategic Stability Dialogue, as well as the NATO-Russia Council, and the OSCE Permanent Council meeting, all of which will take place the week of January 10th."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed to Sputnik that the Biden-Putin talks will take place late in the evening on Thursday Moscow time.

The US administration official said it will take a high-level engagement to find a path toward de-escalation, so Biden will listen closely to what Putin has to say and share comments of his own.

However, the official said the United States continues to see a significant Russian troop presence near Ukraine but believes it is not entirely static. The United States will continue to communicate to Russia that it wants to see a reduction of the troop presence in the area, the official added.

The United States has contingency plans to reinforce its NATO allies should there be further escalation between Russia and Ukraine, the official said, adding that the United States is also ready to provide Ukraine with additional security assistance in the event of an escalation in the region.

The United States has had very good discussions with Ukraine recently about the short-term confidence building measures that Kiev proposed to Moscow, the official noted.

On December 17, Russia released proposals on security guarantees to NATO and the United States that seek to prevent the alliance's further expansion eastward and ban the deployment of US and Russian intermediate and short-range missiles within reach of each other's territory, among other items.

Negotiations on security guarantees between Moscow and Washington are scheduled for January 10, followed by a Russia-NATO Council meeting to discuss the issue on January 12, and the summit of Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe the following day.

Biden and Putin will not participate in the first round of negotiations in Geneva on January 10. However, the US delegation will consist of State and Defense Department officials, according to the White House.

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Lockheed Wins \$847Mln Deal to Build 105 More F-35 Joint Strike Fighters - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Aeronautics has won an \$847,025,000 US Navy modification contract to provide long lead components for production of 105 more F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft for the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, the US Defense Department said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company [of] Fort Worth, Texas is awarded a not-to-exceed \$847,025,000 ... modification contract," the release said on Wednesday.

The agreement increases the scope to procure long lead materials, parts, components, and efforts associated with the production of 105 Lot 17 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft for the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps participants and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customers, the release said. Work on the contract will be performed in Fort Worth, Texas (57%); El Segundo, California (14%); Warton, United Kingdom (9%) and other locations in the United States, Italy and Japan, the release added.

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Ghislaine Maxwell Found Guilty on 5 Charges of Sex Crimes With Involving Minors - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Human trafficker Jeffrey Epstein's associate Ghislaine Maxwell faces decades in prison after a New York jury found her guilty on five of six charges related to the sex trafficking of underage girls, the New York Times reported.

Maxwell was found guilty on Wednesday on five charges including conspiracy to entice minors across state lines to engage in illegal sexual activity, transporting a minor with intent to engage in illegal sexual activity, and sex trafficking of a minor.

Maxwell, daughter of late newspaper publisher Robert Maxwell, was arrested on July 2 on federal charges related to her procuring of young girls alongside Epstein, who allegedly committed suicide in a New York detention center while awaiting trial in August 2019 for illegal sex acts and lying to US federal investigators.

"A unanimous jury has found Ghislaine Maxwell guilty of one of the worst crimes imaginable -- facilitating and participating in the sexual abuse of children. Crimes that she committed with her long-time partner and co-conspirator, Jeffrey Epstein. The road to justice has been far too long. But, today, justice has been done. I want to commend the bravery of the girls - now grown women - who stepped out of the shadows and into the courtroom. Their courage and willingness to face their abuser made this case, and today's result, possible," US Attorney Damian Williams said in a statement after the verdict.

Maxwell faces decades in prison for the convictions, the harshest of which - sex trafficking of minors - carries a maximum penalty of 40 years in prison.

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US Stocks Up Modestly as 'Santa Claus Rally' Remains on Pause

NEW YORK, December 29 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's so-called "Santa Claus rally" appeared to be on pause for a second day in a row as US tech stocks dipped on Wednesday while other blue chips rose just modestly.

Until Monday, the three main equity indexes on the New York Stock Exchange had risen with noticeable vigor for four days in a row, prompting many to think of the Santa Claus rally that typically starts at around Christmas and lasts through the year-end.

Tuesday's action, however, brought that trend to a halt, with the S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite indexes seeing mild drops and the Dow Jones Industrial Average registering just a slight rise.

The latest session on Wednesday reinforced the market's dull turn.

Nasdaq, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, fell 0.1% to finish at 15,766, extending Tuesday's 0.6% decline. Year-to-date, however, the Nasdaq is up 22%.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, closed the day up 0.1% at 4,793, recouping all of the previous day's dip without exceeding the all-time high of 4,807 set on Tuesday. For the year, the S&P 500 remains up 27%.

The blue-chip Dow, which lists a wide variety of stocks from leisure to banking and agriculture, rose another 0.3% like on Tuesday to settle at 36,489. For the year, the Dow is up 19%.

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US Asks Ukrainian Owner of Firefly to Sell His Stake in Company - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US government asked Ukrainian businessman Max Polyakov to sell his shares in the rocket startup company Firefly Aerospace Inc. due to national security concerns, Bloomberg reported.

The report said on Wednesday that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States sent a letter to Polyakov asking him and his investment firm Noosphere Venture Partners to sell the nearly 50 percent shares in Firefly they own.

Polyakov agreed to sell his shares but said he believes his ownership in Firefly does not present a national security threat to the United States, the report said.

The United States is concerned about what might happen to valuable US technology in Ukraine, the report said.

Firefly conducted its first rocket launch in September from the Vandenberg Space Force base in the state of California. The aerospace firm is unable to work on a second launch at present because the US government halted all of its rocket launch operations, the report said.

Polyakov is a wealthy tech entrepreneur who has put more than \$200 million into the Texas-based company over the last several years, the report added.

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US Presidential Medical Adviser Fauci Says Omicron Likely to Peak by 'End of January'

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Cases involving the coronavirus Omicron variant will likely peak by the end of January, presidential medical adviser Anthony Fauci said.

"I would imagine, given the size of our country and the diversity of vaccination versus not vaccination, that it likely will be more than a couple of weeks, probably by the end of January, I would think," Fauci told CNBC said on Wednesday in response to a question about when the coronavirus cases will peak in the United States.

On Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided data showing that the Omicron variant accounted for 58.6% of all new infections in the United States in the week ending on December 25. The Omicron variant, which was first detected in South Africa in November, is said by public health officials to be more transmissible but produces milder cases. The current seven-day daily average of cases in the United States is about 240,400 per day, an increase of about 60% over the previous week, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

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Blinken, French, German, UK Counterparts Reaffirm Support for Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed over the telephone with his French, German and UK counterparts coordination on Russia regarding the tensions with Ukraine as well as US concerns over Iran's nuclear program, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss," the release said on Wednesday. "They discussed the importance of continued coordination to deter any further Russian aggression against Ukraine... They reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity."

The United States and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN TALKS

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed to Sputnik that US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold talks on Thursday.

* Biden and Putin will talk over the telephone and discuss a number of topics, including the security talks slated for early January, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

* Biden and Putin will discuss an array of strategic and security dialogues and will also likely discuss Iran and the diplomatic efforts to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, a senior Biden administration official said.

SITUATION IN UKRAINE

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed a resolution to the Donbas conflict and upcoming US-Russia diplomatic contacts on Wednesday, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

* The United States will remain in close contact with both Ukraine and NATO allies on diplomatic engagements with Russia, Blinken said.

* US officials had very good discussions with their Ukrainian counterparts about the short-term confidence building measures Kiev proposed to Russia, a senior Biden administration official said.

* The United States is ready to provide Ukraine with additional security assistance should Russia carry out an invasion, the Biden administration official said.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * Russia will be ready to immediately start gas supplies to Europe if the European countries decide to launch Nord Stream 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.
- * Global oil prices are rising by more than 1% on Wednesday, and the price of Brent crude exceeded \$80 per barrel first time since November 26, according to trading data.
- * Gazprom has fully fulfilled its obligations to transit gas through Ukraine, transporting 41.5 billion cubic meters in 2021, CEO Alexey Miller said.
- * Gazprom finished filling the second thread of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with gas on Wednesday, Miller told Putin.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CAUCASUS

- * Russia regrets the fact that Georgia did not attend the recent 3+3 format meeting on South Caucasus in Moscow, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko told Sputnik, adding that the door is open for Tbilisi.
- * The commission on the delimitation of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan may be created soon, Rudenko told Sputnik.
- * Moscow welcomes the intentions of Armenia and Turkey to launch a dialogue on normalization of relations, Rudenko told Sputnik.
- * The deployment of NATO strike systems in Georgia will create an immediate threat to Russia and its allies, Rudenko told Sputnik.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO TALKS

- * Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko thanked Russian President Vladimir Putin for supporting cooperation in the aircraft industry.
- * Putin said that the informal summit of the CIS countries' leaders, which had taken place in St. Petersburg on December 28, had been very productive.
- * The talks between Putin and Lukashenko, which lasted about three hours, ended in St. Petersburg, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

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Biden, Putin Not Expected to Participate in Upcoming Geneva Security Talks - US Official
(Updates with additional details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The presidents of the United States and Russia, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, will not participate in the upcoming security negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"President Biden and President Putin are not expected to participate in the talks in Geneva," the official said during a press briefing.

The US delegation in Geneva will be led by the State Department and will include representatives of the Defense Department and the National Security Council, the official added. Biden and Putin are scheduled to discuss over the telephone a range of topics, including bilateral talks through the Strategic Stability Dialogue as well as the NATO-Russia Council and

the OSCE Permanent Council meeting, which are scheduled for the week of January 10, the official also said.

The official reaffirmed the United States' plans to reinforce its NATO allies in case Russia invades Ukraine and added that Washington is ready to discuss Moscow's security concerns but also expects it to do the same with respect to the US concerns.

As regards Ukraine, the official pointed out that Washington is prepared to provide the country with additional military assistance that would allow it to defend itself and respond to an alleged Russian aggression.

The presidents will also discuss Iran and the diplomatic efforts to revive the Iran nuclear deal during an upcoming phone call, the official added.

The United States and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10.

Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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Washington Requires Students to Provide Negative COVID-19 Test to Attend Classes - Mayor

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser announced on Wednesday that schools in the city will require all students to provide a negative COVID-19 test in order to attend classes in person.

"All students will need to provide proof of a negative test result before returning to school," Bowser said via Tweeter.

The measure is one of several that Bowser has introduced as the coronavirus Omicron variant spreads in the US capital just days are scheduled to open for the 2022 school year.

According to data from the US Census Bureau and Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC has reported the highest rate of coronavirus infection in the United States with an average of 1,192 cases per day over the past week.

US health officials, however, have acknowledged that the Omicron cases are mild and have so far not reported any deaths.

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Indonesia Must Allow Rohingya Refugees to Land in Its Territory - UN Refugee Agency

UNITED NATIONS, December 29 (Sputnik) - Indonesia must allow a boat filled with Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution by the military government in Myanmar to disembark safely in its Aceh province, the United Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said on Wednesday.

"To prevent a needless loss of life, the agency strongly urges the Indonesian Government to allow the passengers to safely and immediately disembark," the UNHCR said in a statement.

The UNHCR called for the immediate, life-saving disembarkation of the refugees who had been in distress at sea off the coast of Indonesia. It said that it was "deeply concerned for the safety and lives of those onboard."

The boat was first sighted in the waters off Bireuen, a district in Aceh province, on Sunday. Based on photos and reports from local fishermen, the passengers on the packed boat were overwhelmingly women and children who had suffered a seven month ordeal at sea, the statement said.

The boat, which reportedly is leaking and has a damaged engine, is floating in the open seas in harsh weather and may be at risk of capsizing. Local officials have provided food, medicine, a new boat engine and a technician to help repair the craft and will push it back to international waters once it was fixed, the statement added.

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US Crude Stocks Fall More Than Expected 3rd Week in Row on Year-End Fuel Ramp-Up - EIA

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil fell more than expected for a third straight week last week as refiners ramped up fuel production in anticipation of strong energy usage in the final days of 2021, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data showed Wednesday.

Crude inventories fell by 3.576 million barrels during the week ended December 24, the EIA reported in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

Industry analysts polled by US media had anticipated a drawdown of just around 3.233 million barrels for the week.

The latest crude stockpile drop followed back-to-back declines of 4.715 million and 4.584 million in two previous weeks that also exceeded expectations.

The final weeks of December are typically strong periods for gasoline and diesel consumption in the United States as people take to the road for holiday travels. Trucking activity is also heavy at this time of year due to seasonal gift deliveries.

In an aberration to usual consumption, US gasoline stockpiles swelled two weeks ago by their most in six months as fuel demand briefly slumped amid cutbacks to social activity triggered by the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

By last week though, gasoline usage was back to seasonal trends, with inventories falling by 1.459 million barrels, their most since early November. Analysts had forecast a gasoline consumption of just 31,000 barrels for last week due to continued concerns over the Omicron variant.

Distillate inventories also fell by a substantial 1.726 million barrels last week, the most in three weeks, versus expectations for a drawdown of just 59,000 barrels.

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US Spy Plane Conducts First Flight Over Eastern Ukraine to Gather Intelligence - Reports
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US spy plane JSTARS E-8 has conducted its first flight over eastern Ukraine to collect ground intelligence, CNN reported on Wednesday citing European Command (EUCOM) spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Russ Wolfkiel.

The first overflight in Ukrainian airspace took place on December 27 and was done with the permission of the Ukrainian government, the report said.

Without describing the exact route, Wolfkiel noted that the airplane kept away from the disputed area of the Donbas, the report said.

On Tuesday, a US defense official told Sputnik that the United States is retaining a nuclear aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean instead of sending it on to the Middle East in order to reassure allies as tensions remain high over Ukraine.

The aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman and its escorts are now operating in the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy rather than sailing through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea in support of the US Central Command, according to media reports.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have worsened in the past couple of months amid an alleged Russian troop buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, arguing that Russia has the right to relocate troops within its sovereign territory at its own discretion, while saying that NATO's military activity near Russia's borders poses a threat to its national security.

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US Had Good Talks With Ukraine on Confidence Building Measures Pitched to Russia- Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US officials had very good discussions with Ukrainian counterparts about short-term confidence building measures Kiev put forward to Russia, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"We have had very good discussions with the Ukrainian side in terms of short-term confidence building measures that they have put on the table with the Russian side," the US official said during a conference call with reporters.

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US Has Plans to Reinforce NATO Allies in Case of Further Escalation in Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has made plans to reinforce its NATO allies in the event of a further escalation of the situation regarding Russia and Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"We've made plans to reinforce NATO's force posture in allied states in the event of a further invasion, which would destabilize the security situation in Europe and demand adjustments to NATO forces and capabilities, especially on the eastern flank," the official said.

President Joe Biden and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin are scheduled to talk about upcoming strategic and security dialogues, including the one between Russia and NATO, the official added.

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US Says Ready to Discuss Russia's Security Concerns, Expects Moscow to Respond in Kind

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to discuss Russia's security concerns with regard to eastern Europe and expects Moscow to be ready to hear Washington's concerns as well, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday.

"Russia has put its concerns on the table and we are prepared to discuss them," the US official said during a conference call on Wednesday. "The United States and our allies and partners will put our concerns on the table and expect Russia to be prepared to discuss them as well. This dialogue should and we expect will proceed on the basis of reciprocity."

President Joe Biden has made clear to Russian President Vladimir Putin that the United States is ready to de-escalate tensions in the region through diplomatic talks, but the United States is ready to respond should Russia advance on Ukraine, the US official added.

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Biden, Putin to Discuss Security, Strategic Issues in Upcoming Call - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin will discuss over the telephone on Thursday about an array of strategic and security dialogues, a senior Biden administration official said.

"Tomorrow, President Biden will speak with President Putin by telephone at the request of the Russian side... The two presidents will discuss the upcoming dialogue with Russia on a range of security and strategic issues, and those include bilateral talks through the Strategic Stability Dialogue as well as the NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE Permanent Council meeting, all of which will take place the week of January 10," the official said on Wednesday.

The United States and its allies and partners are prepared to discuss the concerns laid out by Russia, and will communicate concerns of their own and expect Moscow to be prepared to discuss them as well, the official also said.

It will take a high level of engagement to find a path towards de-escalation, so Biden will listen closely to what Putin has to say and share comments of his own, the official added.

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Biden, Putin Likely to Discuss Iran During Phone Call – US Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) – Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin will likely discuss Iran and the diplomatic efforts to revive the Iran nuclear deal during an upcoming phone call, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"The two leaders discussed this at some length when they held their video call a couple of weeks ago, and I do believe that they're likely to discuss it again tomorrow, given that we have ongoing talks in Vienna now and the US, our European partners, and the Russians have been coordinating quite closely in Vienna, working quite constructively together in Vienna," the official told a conference call.

Biden and Putin will hold a phone call on Thursday to discuss a range of topics, including Ukraine and upcoming diplomatic talks in Geneva.

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Biden, Putin Not Expected to Participate in Upcoming Geneva Security Talks – US Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) – The presidents of the United States and Russia, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, will not participate in the upcoming security negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"President Biden and President Putin are not expected to participate in the talks in Geneva," the official said during a press briefing.

The US delegation in Geneva will be led by the State Department and will include representatives of the Department of Defense, as well as representatives from the National Security Council, the official added.

The US and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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US Prepared to Provide Ukraine With More Security Aid Should Russia Invade - Official

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to provide Ukraine with additional security assistance should Russia carry out an invasion, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"We are prepared to provide Ukraine with further assistance to defend its territory and respond to a Russian occupation should a further invasion proceed in the coming weeks," the US official said during a conference call with reporters.

The US official said the United States continues to see a significant Russian troop presence near Ukraine's border.

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US Trade Deficit Reaches Record High \$97.8Bln in November - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit rose by 18% to \$97.8 billion in November as businesses stocked up in advance of the holiday shopping season, the Commerce Department's advance estimate on the international trade of goods indicated on Wednesday.

"The international trade deficit was \$97.8 billion in November, up \$14.6 billion from \$83.2 billion in October," the Commerce Department said in a news release dubbed "Advance International Trade in Goods." Historical data showed the November trade deficit estimate to be the highest ever.

An advanced estimate of wholesale inventories showed a 1.2% increase in November. Retail inventories, meanwhile, rose 2%, according to an early estimate.

US companies typically stock up inventories ahead of the November-December holiday shopping season, which is the busiest time of the year for retailers. This year stocking trends had been heavier-than-usual due to supply disruptions caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic measures.

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US Spy Plane Conducts First Flight Over Eastern Ukraine to Gather Intelligence - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US spy plane JSTARS E-8 has conducted its first flight over eastern Ukraine to collect ground intelligence, CNN reported citing a European Command (EUCOM) spokesperson.

The first overflight in Ukraine airspace took place on December 27 and was done with the

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US 7-Day Average for New COVID-19 Cases Up 60% From Previous Week, Deaths Down by 7% - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US seven-day average for new coronavirus cases is up to 240,400 per day that represents a 60% increase over the previous week, while deaths are down by 7%, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"The current seven-day daily average of cases is about 240,400 cases per day, an increase of about 60% over the previous week. The rapid increase in cases you're seeing across the country is in large part a reflection of the exceptional transmissible Omicron variant," Walensky said during a press briefing. "The seven-day average of daily deaths are about 1,100 per day, which is a decrease of about 7% over the previous week."

The seven-day average of hospital admissions with severe coronavirus infections is about 9,000 per day - an increase of about 14% over the previous week, Walensky said.

CDC expects the coronavirus Omicron variant to continue circulating across the United States in the coming weeks, Walensky added.

On Tuesday, the United States reported a record 265,000 coronavirus cases, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. The second highest number of cases, nearly 252,000, was reported on January 11.

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US to Consult Closely With Ukraine, NATO on Diplomatic Engagements With Russia - Blinken

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will remain in close contact with Ukraine and the NATO allies on diplomatic engagements with Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after a phone call with the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

"Reiterated full US support for Ukraine in my call with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy," Blinken said via Twitter. "We will continue to consult closely with Ukraine, NATO allies, and partners in our diplomatic efforts to deter further Russian aggression."

Meanwhile, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said after the call between Blinken and Zelenskyy that they discussed a resolution to the Donbas conflict and upcoming US-Russia diplomatic contacts.

"Secretary Blinken reiterated the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders," Price said. "The two discussed efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine and upcoming diplomatic engagements with Russia."

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have increased in the past several weeks amid an alleged Russian troop buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying that Russia has the right to relocate the troops within its territory at its own discretion, while NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its security.

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Webb Telescope Has Enough Fuel to Double Projected Life Span for Operations - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The James Webb Space Telescope launched on December 25 has enough fuel to carry out science operations for at least a decade, twice as long as its projected life span, NASA announced on Wednesday.

"[T]he Webb team has analyzed its initial trajectory and determined the observatory should have enough propellant to allow support of science operations in orbit for significantly more than a ten-year science lifetime," NASA said in a press release.

NASA said the analysis was carried out after the successful launch of the telescope and the completion of two mid-course correction maneuvers.

"The analysis shows that less propellant than originally planned for is needed to correct Webb's trajectory toward its final orbit around the second Lagrange point known as L2, a point of gravitational balance on the far side of Earth away from the Sun. Consequently, Webb will have much more than the baseline estimate of propellant," the release said.

Webb has rocket propellant for mid-course correction and insertion into orbit around L2, and for necessary functions during the life of the mission, including "station keeping" maneuvers - small thruster burns to adjust its orbit - as well as momentum management, which maintains the telescope's orientation in space, the release added.

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Biden, Putin Will Have Phone Call on Thursday - White House

(Adds details in para 5, background in paras 2, 6)

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin will have a phone conversation on Thursday to discuss a number of topics, including the security talks slated for early January, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Wednesday.

Putin and Biden faced each other virtually on December 7, six months after meeting in person in Geneva.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will hold a phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia on Thursday, December 30, 2021 to discuss a range of topics, including upcoming diplomatic engagements with Russia," Horne said in a statement.

Biden has had numerous contacts with allies prior to the upcoming call, the official noted.

"Biden has spoken with leaders across Europe, and Biden Administration officials have engaged multilaterally with NATO, the EU, and the OSCE. Officials have also held numerous consultations with their counterparts, including those from eastern flank countries bilaterally and in the B9 format as well as Ukraine," she added.

The US and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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White House Confirms Biden, Putin to Talk on Thursday

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin will have a phone conversation on Thursday afternoon to discuss a number of topics, including the security talks slated for early January, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Wednesday

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will hold a phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia on Thursday, December 30, 2021 to discuss a range of topics, including upcoming diplomatic engagements with Russia," Horne said in a statement.

CNN reported earlier in the day that the call was requested by the Russian leader.

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CDC Chief Says US Halved COVID-19 Quarantine Time as That's What People Will Tolerate

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US health authorities halved to five days the quarantine period for those who had not fallen sick despite exposure to the novel coronavirus as studies showed that is what most people were willing to endure, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"It really had a lot to do with what we thought people would be able to tolerate," Walensky said during an appearance on CNN. "We have seen relatively low rates of isolation for all of this pandemic. Some science has demonstrated (that) less than a third of people are isolating when they need to. So we really want to make sure that we had guidelines in this moment [which] people were willing to adhere to."

Prior to its latest recommendation, the CDC recommended a ten-day quarantine for any individual not exhibiting illness from suspected exposure or confirmed infection with the novel coronavirus.

The revision came after the Biden administration decided to reduce quarantine periods for infected healthcare workers without symptoms so that they could continue attending to sick people.

Walensky's comments came amid increasing evidence found by health authorities in recent weeks that exposure or infection related to the new coronavirus Omicron variant seldom leads to serious illness or death.

Data shows that nearly 75% of the US population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while nearly 62% has had two doses that fulfill the "fully vaccinated" definition.

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US Will Consult Closely With Ukraine, NATO on Diplomatic Engagements With Russia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will remain in close contact with both Ukraine and NATO allies on diplomatic engagements with Russia, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after a phone call with the Ukrainian president on Wednesday.

"Reiterated full U.S. support for Ukraine in my call with Ukrainian President @ZelenskyyUa," Blinken wrote on Twitter. "We will continue to consult closely with Ukraine, @NATO Allies, and partners in our diplomatic efforts to deter further Russian aggression."

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US-Based Company's Self-Driving Semi-Truck Completes World's First Run on Public Roadways

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - A self-driving semi-truck developed by US-based autonomous driving technology company TuSimple completed the world's first run on public roadways last week, the company said in a press release on Wednesday.

"TuSimple (Nasdaq: TSP), a global autonomous driving technology company, successfully completed the world's first fully autonomous semi-truck run on open public roads without a human in the vehicle and without human intervention," the release said.

The run, which took place on December 22, required the up-fitted autonomous semi-truck to travel more than 80 miles from a large railyard in Tucson, Arizona, to a high-volume distribution center in the Phoenix metro area, the release said.

The one-hour and 20-minute drive marks the first time a heavy duty truck has operated on open public roads without a human in the vehicle or otherwise intervening, the release added.

The test was conducted in coordination with government and law enforcement officials to ensure public safety, according to the release.

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Blinken Discusses With Zelenskyy Donbas, Future Contacts With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed a resolution to the Donbas conflict and upcoming US-Russia diplomatic contacts on Wednesday, State Department spokesman Ned Price said. "Secretary Blinken reiterated the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders," Price said. "The two discussed efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine and upcoming diplomatic engagements with Russia."

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US to Decide in 'Days or Weeks Ahead' on COVID Booster Shots for 12-15 Year Olds - CDC

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US health authorities hope to make a decision in the coming days or weeks on COVID booster vaccines for children ages 12 to 15, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said Wednesday. "The FDA [Food and Drug Administration] is currently looking at the issue of booster shots for those 12 to 15," Walensky said during an appearance on CNN. "Of course, the CDC will swiftly follow as soon as we hear from them, and I'm hoping to have that in the days to weeks ahead." Walensky said drug makers were also studying data on COVID vaccines for children under the age of 5. "That will not be in the month ahead. But we're working hard to get there soon." US children between the ages 5 and 12 are approved so far for only primary COVID vaccine shots, made up of two Pfizer doses, and many have only begun their inoculation in recent weeks.

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Jury Deliberations Continue in Elizabeth Holmes Trial After Closed Legal Team Meeting

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Jury deliberations resumed in the trial of Theranos health technology company founder Elizabeth Holmes on Wednesday morning following a closed-door meeting between the legal teams and the judge the prior day, according to court filings.

The prosecution and defense teams met with Judge Edward Davila for 23 minutes on Tuesday morning, but the transcript of the meeting was ordered sealed, court documents filed late on Tuesday said. Holmes was not present at the meeting.

Jury deliberations entered their sixth day of deliberations on Wednesday morning, weighing whether Holmes is guilty of perpetrating a wire-fraud scheme to defraud investors in Theranos. The company, founded in 2003, attracted millions in investment on claims that it invented reliable methods to test blood for a range of diseases using only several drops. The company

was once considered to be worth more than \$9 billion, earning Holmes acclaim as an extremely successful entrepreneur.

However, US media suggested in 2015 that the company's own testing equipment might produce unreliable results and that Theranos was using other manufacturers' machines to run their tests. The publication was followed by closer examinations by authorities, lawsuits and, eventually, criminal charges for Holmes and former Theranos CFO Ramesh Balwani.

The jury listened to testimony from 32 witnesses over the course of a three month trial, including from Holmes herself. She testified that Balwani, with whom she was romantically involved, abused her and held control over her during the time period during which the alleged crimes occurred. Balwani pleaded not guilty to the same charges as Holmes and is expected to face trial in 2022.

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Kamala Harris Seeks Policy Advice From Financial, Tech CEOs - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris has extensively relied upon the expertise of American corporate executives to find solutions to pressing policy issues, including the migrant crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

Harris sought advice from Microsoft President Brad Smith, Cisco CEO Chuck Robbins and Citigroup CEO Jane Fraser among others during multiple phone calls, video conferences and strategy meetings, the report said.

In the spring, Harris reportedly had phone conversations with Microsoft's Smith, Chobani CEO Hamdi Ulukaya, and Mastercard Chairman Ajay Banga in an effort to address poverty, climate change and corruption in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Corporate leaders, in turn, used engagements with Harris to promote their own agenda and priorities, including lobbying against changes to the tax code or backing legislation that could benefit their respective companies, according to the report.

The corporate leaders' expertise played crucial role for the vice president to make an impact on issues she is responsible for in the Biden administration and, at the same time, to take media attention away from her failures, misstatements and her staff's discontent, the report noted.

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US Confirms 2 Appointments in Charge of Afghan Women's Rights - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has appointed two officials to lead the United States' efforts to defend the rights of Afghan women and girls under the Taliban government (under UN sanctions for terrorism), Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"Two highly qualified and respected leaders will advance the State Department's vital work to support Afghan women, girls, and human rights: Special Envoy Rina Amiri and Senior Advisor Stephenie Foster. They bring decades of public policy, diplomatic and advocacy experience to the Department," Blinken said.

Amiri served as senior adviser to the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan during the administration of President Barack Obama.

Blinken explained that Amiri will work on issues of critical importance to the Biden administration and US national security, focusing on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women, girls, and other at-risk populations "in all of their diversity."

"We desire a peaceful, stable, and secure Afghanistan, where all Afghans can live and thrive in political, economic, and social inclusivity. Special Envoy Amiri will work closely with me toward that goal," he said.

Blinken added that Foster, a career diplomat, will help advance the State Department's Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) team with its relocation and resettlement efforts on behalf of our Afghan allies and their families.

The announcement comes a day after Taliban opened fire on protesters in Kabul near a building that housed the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the past.

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White House Says to Announce New Resources, Personnel to States as COVID-19 Surges
WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The White House will announce a personnel and supply boost to states on Wednesday as the country grapples with a COVID-19 resurgence, with over 500,000 cases reported in the past 24 hours, assistant press secretary Kevin Munoz said on Wednesday.

"Today, we're announcing new resources and personnel to states, as well as new federal testing sites via @NBCNews. Join the COVID-19 briefing today at 11am ET," Munoz wrote on Twitter. White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients will outline the administration's latest efforts, which include deploying 2,100 federal personnel, 1 million gloves, nearly 350,000 masks and thousands of ventilators, NBC News said in a report, attached by Munoz.

Zients is expected to announce plans to open more testing sites in New Jersey, Philadelphia and Washington in the coming days, according to the report.

The current increase in the daily number of COVID-19 cases in the US is believed to be driven by the spread of the Omicron coronavirus strain. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced on Tuesday that the Omicron variant accounted for 58.6% of all new infections in the country in the week prior to December 25.

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US to Announce Two Appointments in Charge of Afghan Women's Rights - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The State Department will announce on Wednesday the appointment of two officials to lead US efforts to defend the rights of Afghan women and girls under the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism), NBC News reported.

Rina Amiri will be named as special envoy for Afghan women, girls and human rights. She served as senior adviser to the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan during the administration of Barack Obama.

Stephenie Foster, another veteran official, will be appointed senior adviser for women and girls issues, becoming a part of the team working on Afghan relocation efforts.

The report comes a day after Taliban opened fire on protesters in Kabul near a building that housed the ministry of women's affairs in the past.

The Taliban's swift ascension to power in Afghanistan occurred in August, causing economic disarray and food shortages pushing the country to the brink of a humanitarian crisis.

Thousands of Afghans fled the country fearful of the Taliban, widespread violation of human rights, and the deprivation of women and girls of their freedoms.

In early December, the leadership of the new Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan issued a decree on women's rights, saying that women have the right to choose their own destiny, but rights to employment and education were not mentioned.

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US Charges Financial Company, Its President With Stock Price Fraud - SEC

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) – US authorities have charged Medallion Financial Company from the state of Delaware, along with its President and Chief Operating Officer Andrew Murstein, with illegally engaging in two schemes to shore up the entity's plunging stock price, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Wednesday.

"According to the SEC's complaint, Medallion's core business was making loans backed by taxicab medallions to taxicab owners and operators. However, the popularity of ride-sharing companies like Uber and Lyft led to a decline in the value of taxicab medallions and of Medallion's stock price," the statement read.

Murstein and Medallion allegedly created two separate schemes to inflate the company's stock price with the support of media strategy company Ichabod's Cranium, Inc., and its owner, Lawrence Meyers, it added.

Both Ichabod and Meyers were also charged by the SEC with fraud.

The SEC filed the complaint with a federal district court in Manhattan. The filing said that Murstein and Medallion engaged in illegal touting by paying Ichabod's Cranium and others to distribute positive stories about the company on various websites, including Huffington Post, according to the statement.

"The complaint further alleges that Medallion and Murstein fraudulently increased the carrying value of Medallion Bank (the Bank), a wholly owned subsidiary of Medallion, to offset losses relating to the taxicab medallion loans," the statement added.

The SEC charged Murstein and Medallion with violating the antifraud, books and records, internal controls, and anti-touting provisions of federal securities laws.